

Representative Skip Priest

2006 Session Review



May 2006

Friends and neighbors,

The 2006 legislative session ended March 8, one day early this year. As always, it was my pleasure to represent you in Olympia. Thank you to all of you who returned your survey this year. Your feedback was vital and greatly appreciated.

This year's legislative session broke many records: we adjourned one day early, which has not been done since the 1980's; introduced a record number of bills; and approved the state's largest-ever supplemental budget. Overall, it was a mixed session, with notable successes and, in the case of the budget, another missed opportunity. I was disappointed to see the Legislature ignore the proven Priorities of Government approach to budgeting—an approach I believe is absolutely necessary to protect taxpayer dollars.

Looking back over the session's accomplishments, I'm pleased to have taken a leading role on a number of important issues that will benefit the 30th District and our state. These include:

- Creating thoughtful alternatives to the WASL; ones that maintain the rigorous education requirements that today's economy demands while providing flexible approaches to students to show that they have achieved our goals.
- Developing a clear career and technical education pathway for high school and community college students.
- Co-sponsoring and being a leading spokesperson for the passage of consumer-friendly electronic waste legislation. The bill represents a true partnership between environmental and consumer groups and local retailers for the benefit of us all.
- Serving as a trustee of the state's Life Sciences Discovery Fund, a fund that will help develop our region's jobs of the future.

I was also pleased with the response given to my auto-theft legislation. The bill passed out of the House policy committee unanimously! While the bill eventually stalled in the crowded Appropriations Committee, I'm optimistic that we will be successful in passing the legislation next year.

More, of course, needs to be done, particularly in the area of education. As a leader on both the House Education and Higher Education committees and the governor's Washington Learns task force, I will be working over the interim to develop plans that will ensure that education dollars will be invested fairly and wisely in a system that will be in the best interest of our students and our community.

Thank you, again, for allowing me to represent our district. I encourage you to contact me anytime during the break between sessions with questions or concerns. **I look forward to your feedback and input on issues impacting the 30th District.**

Skip Priest
State Representative - 30th District

P.O. Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600
Olympia Office: (360) 786-7830
Legislative Hotline:
1-800-562-6000
[Priest.Skip@leg.wa.gov](mailto: Priest.Skip@leg.wa.gov)



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30th District

122A Legislative Building
Olympia, WA 98504

(360) 786-7830

Priest.Skip@leg.wa.gov

Committees:

Judiciary, Ranking Republican
Appropriations
House Education (K-12)
Higher Education &
Workforce Training

Web site:

[http://hrc.leg.wa.gov/
members/priest](http://hrc.leg.wa.gov/members/priest)

Toll-Free Legislative Hotline:

1-800-562-6000

Hearing-impaired Hotline:

1-800-635-9993



WORKING TOGETHER, WASL & CAREER PATH ALTERNATIVES APPROVED

Long-time legislative observers believe the 2006 session was the best session for career and technical education programs in over a decade. Working with Tom Murphy, Federal Way School Superintendent; Nancy Hawkins, Federal Way School District Career and Technical Education Director; and Dr. Gill Mendoza, Executive Director, Career and Technical Education, Tacoma Public Schools, we made significant strides toward creating a clear path for those students wishing to pursue a career and technical education program in high school and community college.

Career and technical education (CTE) is of growing importance to our region's economy and our educational system. Today, family-wage jobs go unfilled because of a lack of trained applicants. Our schools face an unacceptable drop-out rate due in part because some students are not given the opportunity for a hands-on experience that will keep their interest and encourage them to learn the rigorous reading, writing, and mathematical skills that are necessary in today's world.

The Legislature took a number of steps to address this issue. First, it passed legislation I introduced, HB 2973, that ensures that CTE programs provided by school districts will be of a high quality and directed toward providing both technical and academic skills. Second, it provides a career and technical alternative to the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). Under language I also proposed, students who fail the WASL twice can pursue a CTE alternative, one that requires the attainment of a state or national program certificate.

Third, it provides additional funding for skills centers where many vocational programs are taught. Not surprisingly, high quality CTE programs often require expensive training equipment. The days of the shop in the school basements are gone. Many CTE programs are extremely sophisticated and need additional resources to provide the computers and other technology necessary for a student to receive certification.

In other steps, we also approved the idea of establishing pre-apprenticeship programs in high schools as well as funded "opportunity grants" for community college students who wish to pursue technical careers.

Together, these efforts take us a long way to attaining our goal of keeping kids in school while providing them with the skills necessary for the new economy. At the end of the day, I'm confident that these students will have the option of either wanting to own the car dealership or working in the back making a living wage for themselves and their families.

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next pg.)



Rep. Skip Priest stands alongside the governor as his career and technical education bill, HB 2973, is signed into law on March 20 in Tacoma.

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Students from the Latino Educational Achievement Program in the 30th District gathered for a photo on the House floor February 10 after meeting with Rep. Priest.

(Education continued)

It will remain our goal over the long term to grow these valuable training programs, lower our unconscionable drop-out rate and fill the high-paying jobs in our state with qualified and skilled workers. This workforce will be vital to keeping our state's economic development healthy.

It was great to have a voice at the table with fellow lawmakers, educators, parents and students all committed to our students' success. Our work in crafting this balance of rigorous course work, alternative testing and curriculum will benefit every student and prepare them for a successful career.

I have every idea we'll be back at the table next year, but this year we realized some great successes that will benefit our next generation of professionals. As always, your comments and suggestions about the WASL and alternatives are welcome.

BENEFITS FOR FAMILIES OF EMERGENCY PERSONNEL KILLED IN THE LINE OF DUTY APPROVED

The Legislature, with my strong support, passed legislation drafted in honor of emergency personnel like Federal Way Officer Patrick M. Maher. The bill allows surviving spouses and their families to maintain important health insurance coverage should their spouse be killed in the line of duty.

August 2, 2003, Officer Maher responded to a relatively routine call to assist in keeping the peace. Trying to break up a fight at the scene, a struggle ensued and Officer Maher was shot and killed by the perpetrator.



Shortly after this tragedy, Mrs. Renee Maher, widow of the slain officer, learned that her family's medical benefits would be canceled due to her husband's death. With the passage of this legislation, families coping with the untimely death of their spouse will no longer have to deal with the additional stress of losing their health insurance.

As the mayor of the city of Federal Way when the city started its own police department, this is an extremely personal issue to me. I know I speak for many others when I congratulate Mrs. Maher for her leadership on this important cause.

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE REFORMS

Unemployment insurance represents one of the most expensive costs of doing business in our state. The good news is that the Legislature passed Senate Bill 6885, again with my strong support, that will help curb rising costs while providing both fairness and equity to employees and employers alike.

With only 59 days to reach agreement, a bipartisan House and Senate team was appointed to negotiate a solution that both labor and business could support. After long and spirited negotiations, the legislative agreement creates a steady rate structure allowing for less subsidizing between rate classes. It will also provide stability for ratepayers and those receiving benefits. Unanimously supported by every stakeholder, it will help provide necessary predictability in this critical area.

THE SUPPLEMENTAL BUDGET

Four years ago, as a new legislator, I was faced with a \$2.7 billion budget deficit. In order to jump-start our struggling economy while protecting our most vulnerable citizens, we had to make many extremely difficult decisions. These decisions often affected many who had come to rely on government programs.

At the time, I thought the Legislature had learned a very important lesson. Deficits happen because of the bow wave that occurs when government programs are started that create expensive obligations in later years. Apparently, the Legislature has not learned from past mistakes.

This year, our state finally received some good economic news—a \$1.6 billion surplus. After several years of program cuts and the tax hikes of last year, we finally had an opportunity to save for future budget shortfalls and make good on vital program funding like legally obligated pension payments. The Legislature chose another path, however. Rather than use the supplemental budget for its traditional purpose of making adjustments not anticipated in the regular budget (high school enrollments for example), we decided to spend almost \$500 million on new and expanded programs. The result is a projected budget deficit for the next biennium of over \$600 million.

This type of budget decision-making is very risky. It is time that we step off this treacherous path. It is time that we return to a true Priorities of Government approach that will ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent wisely while protecting the safety net for all.





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STATE PARK FEES ELIMINATED

In 2003, the state Parks and Recreation Commission instituted a \$5 day-use fee for state parks to make up for budget shortfalls. While not a legislative action, many of us felt this fee prevented families from enjoying our state parks. In fact, testimony on this year's bill to repeal the fee affirmed dramatically reduced park attendance since the fee was instated.

With the passage of House Bill 2416 this year, the day-use fee at state parks was eliminated. Once again, our area parks, including Dash Point State Park and Saltwater State Park, are accessible to all visitors without paying a \$5 day-use fee. Hylebos Park in Federal Way, transferred to the city because of the original imposition of the fee, will remain free of charge to visitors. The repeal of the fees took effect April 9.



AUTO-THEFT BILL READY FOR NEXT YEAR

As discussed in the opening letter, we made significant progress in addressing the growing crime of auto theft. My legislation, House Bill 2822, was well-received and passed unanimously out of the House Criminal Justice and Corrections Committee. Unfortunately, it was caught in the crush of other bills scheduled for hearings before the House Appropriations Committee.



The bill, as originally drafted, would put teeth in the penalties for repeat offenders. It included tough components such as:

- Imposing mandatory minimum sentences on the first offense and escalating those sentences for subsequent offenses;
- Creating three statewide regional auto-theft task forces; and
- Funding proactive auto-theft SWAT units.

In the next few months, I will continue to work with Federal Way Police Chief Anne Kirkpatrick and the King County Auto Theft Task Force to ensure the legislation's passage in the 2007 session.